NW Kent College: ‘How To’ raise IT skills with on-demand screen-capture video guides

Summary

Ensuring staff are confident and proficient in IT is an essential prerequisite to achieving e-maturity. North West Kent College is not alone in trying to solve the various challenges associated with IT-based staff development. Using Adobe Captivate to quickly and efficiently create a series of animated ‘How To’ guides, this College has found a highly effective way of providing anytime, anywhere and on-demand IT support for both staff and students alike.

About North West Kent College

North West Kent College runs a wide variety of academic and vocational courses for over 4000 full-time students from two main campuses approximately 12 miles apart in Dartford and Gravesend. The Dartford campus specialises in Access to Higher Education, Art and Design, Photography and Multimedia, Business Studies, GCE ‘A’ Levels, Media Studies, Performing and Technical Arts, Professional Care, Travel and Tourism, and Management Studies. The Gravesend campus caters for Art and Design, Construction and Building Services, Engineering, Hotel and Catering, Motor Vehicle, Professional Care, Refrigeration, and Maritime programmes. Computing and Administration, Hairdressing and Beauty Therapy, Secretarial Studies, and Sport and Public Services are taught in both locations. The College continues to place high importance on educational and business connections in and around the Thames Gateway area whilst a partnership with the University of Greenwich has contributed to the development of full-time Higher Education programmes and Foundation Degrees.

The challenge

The challenges of achieving effective staff development, particularly with regard to IT skills, are universal and all too familiar. Such training is often delivered as one small session in a packed programme during staff training days; there follows little opportunity to consolidate any new knowledge gained; and when appropriate opportunities present themselves to use new technology, practitioners have forgotten
the skills they were shown and there is limited help on hand to get them up and running.

North West Kent College is committed to the development of its e-learning program and is working hard to increase the level of e-maturity in all curriculum areas. The key to maintaining such progress is having staff that are IT confident and skilled; and no-one knows that better than Staff Development Manager Kay Gingell. By working closely with the College’s e-Learning Manager, Steve Humphries, Kay and Steve have devised a cost-effective solution to providing anytime, anywhere and on-demand IT support for staff through the introduction of their ‘How To’ animated video guides.

The activity

Kay explains: “As Staff Development Manager, I was made aware of the frustrations staff had, not getting the necessary support when they needed it. At the same time, Steve Humphries was constantly being asked for ad-hoc IT help by individuals, which he felt was important to give but did not represent the most effective use of his time. The good relationship between e-Learning and Staff Development meant we were able to see that we were both looking for the same solution.”

“We have one full-time IT Trainer for our staff, John Richards, who also provides a telephone help-line. This means that when he is training, he cannot provide help-line support, reducing the level of service we want to provide. We needed to come up with a way of bridging this problem. The idea was to find an effective method of answering most of the staff’s basic queries when and where they needed to know; and the result was our ‘How To’ guides.”

This wasn’t the first time that North West Kent (NWK) had dabbled with animated guides. The College had already built up a suite of around 70 videos for students from the beginning of 2008, which were limited to guides for Office Word and Excel. Although popular by the students that used them, historically these were only used by computing students.

Kay liaised closely with e-Learning Manager Steve Humphries and they came up with the idea of using a screen-capture program to create an extended suite of animated ‘How To’ guides for staff that would cover specific aspects of Word, Excel, Outlook, PowerPoint, Moodle and college proprietary software such as Profiler (for ILPs) and NWK’s SharePoint. After researching various programs to create the guides, Steve decided upon Adobe’s Captivate for several reasons:

- Best performance/price ratio
- Enables interactivity during the video thus providing simulation and assessment opportunities
- Automatic creation of labels and prompt boxes

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Quick and easy to use

Steve observes: “If I have a 90 second guide to produce, it takes me 90 seconds to record and no more than 5 minutes to check and it’s all done. In fact I often start recording with Captivate whenever I am answering an impromptu query from a colleague. Five minutes later, I am able to give them the recording of what we have just covered which really helps them to retain the information or act as an aide memoir at a later date.”

At the beginning of 2009, Steve and Kay started using Captivate to create guides for staff and in January 2010 they formerly launched the ‘How To’ scheme with over 140 animated guides. Each video lasts between 30 seconds to two minutes and is stored in Flash format on the College SharePoint system so that staff can access these guides from any location and at any time.

The outcomes

The results have been extremely encouraging. Not only are staff getting targeted support exactly when they need it, but they are also becoming very enthusiastic about using the ‘How To’ guides technique for teaching and learning in their own curriculum areas.

John Richards, the Staff IT Trainer at NWK College who was heavily involved with this project says: “Putting these help files together has been time-consuming, but an easy task. Adobe Captivate works very well in this area, especially with the smaller file sizes that we have produced. The outcome, given the positive feedback we have received, has been worth the input”. The ‘How To’ guides ensure staff can access answers to their user queries even when John is facilitating staff training sessions with other colleagues.
Captivate’s call out facility provides clear explanations for independent learning

The impact

For anyone else considering this solution, Kay recommends the use of various ‘actors’ (ie willing members of staff) for the narration of the guides. She explains: “Feedback on the ‘How To’ guides was critical of the single voice used for the narration of all their animated videos. I realised that we needed to inject a bit of variety by using as many different voices as possible and to ensure that the narrative is animated”.

Staying with the sound tracks on the ‘How To’ guides, Steve adds: “It’s definitely worth spending a little more money on your microphones, as this will have a real bearing on quality which influences how well the staff adopt these guides”.

Step-by-step guidance showing the viewer how to use Word’s Page Setup
The success of the ‘How To’ project with staff has renewed Steve’s determination to expand the student guides into other curriculum areas, building up a library of videos covering all subjects that are accessed via the College’s Moodle learning platform. At the same time, he wants to generate a suite of Office 2007 guides to match the increasing use of this version of Office throughout the College.

For Steve, the next step is to develop the organisation’s existing work using on-screen animated feedback – saved as a video – for assessment purposes. He would also like to embed Captivate-generated ‘How To’ guides in other College documents. “We are already trialling the use of Captivate animated videos into our SARs,” says Steve. “On the basis of this pilot, I would like to see ‘How To’ guides embedded into observation forms, schemes of work and lesson plans.”

Steve sums things up: “The success of the ‘How To’ guides illustrates just how well IT can be utilised to provide cost-effective solutions to help any provider raise its standards of teaching and learning whilst at the same time driving up levels of e-maturity.”

**Useful links**

- North West Kent College
- Adobe Captivate
- Catalogue of Screen Capture Software
- Camtasia Studio

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